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NEW YORK AND ITS HISTORIANS.—II.

BY MRS. SCHUYLER VAN RENSSLAER.

All the destined depth and persistence of the power of Irving's ridicule, however, Verplanck could not clearly have foreseen in 1819. More impressive than his words are those of James Grahame, who was not a Dutch New Yorker, or an American of any sort, but a Scotch lawyer who never even visited this country. In 1827 he published the first portion of a long and, for its day, a remarkably good history of colonial times in the United States; and in a note to it he says:

"*Founders of ancient colonies have sometimes been deified by their successors. New York is perhaps the only commonwealth whose founders have been assailed with ridicule from the same quarter. It is impossible to read the ingenious and diverting romance entitled Knickerbocker's History of New York without wishing that the author had put either a little more or a little less truth into it; and that his talent for humor and sarcasm had found another subject than the dangers, hardships and virtues of the ancestors of his national family. It must be unfavorable to patriotism to connect historical recollections with ludicrous associations; but the genius of Mr. Irving has done this so effectually that it is difficult for his readers to behold the names of Wouter Van Twiller, of Corlaer and of Peter Stuyvesant without a smile; or to see the free and happy colonists of New York enslaved by the forces of a despot without a sense of ridicule that abates the resentment which injustice should excite and the sympathy which is due to misfortune.* * * * *Probably my discernment of the unsuitableness of this writer's mirth is quickened by a sense of personal wrong, as I cannot help feeling that he has by anticipation ridiculed my topic and parodied my narrative. If Sancho Panza had been a real governor misrepresented by the prior wit of Cervantes, his posterior historian would have found it no easy matter to bespeak a grave attention to the annals of his administration.*"*

* Far from bringing Grahame the honor and profit he should have reaped, his book attracted scarcely any attention in England, and entailed upon him a loss of some £'000. The first adequate notice of it, and the first of any kind printed in America, appeared three years after the issue of its earlier portions, in THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW of January, 1831. This says that "Mr. Grahame, with a spirit able to appreciate his subject, has published what we conceive to be the best book that has anywhere appeared upon the early history of America." His materials

What Grahame here says of his personal feelings is particularly instructive. There is indeed good reason to believe that, while the influence of Irving's book was helped by the paucity of veracious chronicles of early New York, it has acted as a deterrent in regard to their later production.

There have been many examples of the profound effect of literary skill combined with truth-telling—as in the rehabilitation of Cromwell by Carlyle. But probably no untruthful book ever had so great an effect as Irving's. Nothing in American literature can be compared with it excepting Peters's travesty of the blue-laws of Connecticut, and even this only remotely, for, although it was long and widely believed, the true facts were much better known in regard to Connecticut than to New York. Here, of course, we read part of the secret of Knickerbocker's power. If it had been a caricature of a well-known tale and of well-remembered persons, it would have done little harm. But it was less than a caricature—it was an almost baseless fantasy. Irving himself knew scarcely any facts upon which to build it up; and his readers, knowing as few, could not guess in how far he was over-emphasizing or under-emphasizing, or was simply drawing upon his imagination.

For example, in an early notice of Knickerbocker, printed in the *Monthly Anthology and Boston Review*—the precursor of the *NORTH AMERICAN*—it is said that to examine the book “seriously in a historical point of view would be ridiculous,” but that “the few important events of the period to which it relates are, we presume, recorded with accuracy as to their dates and consequences.” More illuminative even than the falsity of this statement is the artlessness of its “we presume.” Very naïve also are certain comments upon Verplanck's address in the *NORTH AMERICAN* of 1819: “We are inclined to believe that a complete account of New Netherland and of the proceedings of the Dutch occupants while they possessed the government would exhibit their character to advantage.” And the same unembarrassed lack of knowledge speaks again in that often-quoted declaration of Chancellor Kent, made before the Historical Society in 1828, which, like the

were very scanty compared with those of to-day, yet his account of early New York is juster than some that have recently been written, partly because of the wise distrust with which he regarded Trumbull and certain other New England writers. It is a pity that even in America Grahame's name and work are now so generally forgotten.

Knickerbocker caricature, has done much to discourage the study of our past—the declaration that “the Dutch colonial annals are of a tame and pacific character, and generally dry and uninteresting.”

But there was another reason, in addition to its own literary merit and the general lack of historical knowledge, which helped the vogue of Knickerbocker. It expressed a frame of mind that prevailed in its time in every English-speaking community, and had thus prevailed for generations.

When the commercial life of England began to develop, Holland's was already the most flourishing in the world; when England was torn by political and religious feuds, Holland was the world's house of refuge, its only exponent of political liberty and religious toleration; and when England's naval power grew strong, Holland's was its only rival. Dread, jealousy, and envy, embittered by the hatred of religious intolerance for free speech and free thought, nourished a national antagonism to the Dutch, and, as almost always happens with such a feeling, it tried to mask itself as contempt. For generations the literature of England in nearly every branch was flavored by the national hatred for Holland, and the sentiment thus expressed was transplanted to America in the baggage of the immigrant. Puritans and Pilgrims, one might think, would have been purged of it by the weight and the nature of their direct personal debt to the Protestant Netherlands. But if they acknowledged this debt in some degree while tarrying on Holland's hospitable soil, in England they thought and spoke as abusively of Dutch tolerance as did continental Catholics and Lutherans. And in New England the Old World obligation was soon forgotten in the sense of what Puritans and Pilgrims owed to themselves; and themselves they regarded as God's peculiar people, or (to quote the words of a Netherlander commenting upon these facts), as “saints to whom the earth belonged.”

To New York also the antagonistic national feeling was transferred, from New England and from the mother country. There was, of course, much friendship between New Yorkers of dissimilar blood; as I have said, party lines were not drawn parallel with lines of descent; and in non-official social life the great Dutch families kept the lead during colonial times. Yet official prestige, official influence, and the connection of many prominent New Yorkers with the governor's “court” tended strongly to the

exaltation of English ideas; and even after the Revolution had dimmed the old dividing lines and banished troops of Tory citizens, the classes that then formed the reading public had not forgotten, in their attachment to the new Republic, their sentimental and literary regard for English precedent and current example. Verplanck deplored the fact that his fellow-citizens, even before the appearance of the Knickerbocker History, had "imbibed much of the English habit of arrogance and injustice toward the Dutch character," falling in with the temper of English writers who had long been accustomed "to describe the peculiar manners and customs of Holland with a broad and clumsy exaggeration." I need hardly note that Irving's own sympathies, as shown in many of his books, turned strongly toward England, and he was a type of his large circle. Therefore, although a few Dutch New Yorkers protested against his New York book, the mood in which he wrote exactly suited the mood of most of those for whom he wrote. Naturally, his welcome in England was as warm as at home; and New England forgave his jeers at her own founders in her amusement at the more plentiful ridicule heaped upon those whom she had formerly been in the habit of calling her "noxious neighbors."

A curious little instance of the prevailing point of view was the fastening upon New York of the nickname "Gotham." This, say the dictionaries, is the name of a town in Nottinghamshire, which as early as the fourteenth century grew proverbial because of the "simplicity" or the "rusticity and stupidity" of its inhabitants. I have found in no dictionary a reference to the first application of the name to New York, although I do find a statement that its derivative, "Gothamite," was first employed by Irving in the Salmagundi papers. But whoever may be responsible for its transplantation, this evidently betrays the English spirit which, quite disregarding the facts in the case, always chose to ridicule Hollanders as Boetians. New Yorkers have had many faults and deficiencies, but they have never been simple, slow, or stupid. Yet Gothamites they were called, with as much contempt and as little intelligence as were shown in New England when the Dutch word *boer* was translated *boor* and accepted in the modern English sense. These New World terms, indeed, are parallel in spirit to one that is still commonly used in the Old and the New World both, and in New York as well as New

England. When, to mark his dullness or awkwardness, we call a man a "Dutchman," we now fancy that we are referring to German traits, although with an incorrect word. But we are really echoing the jealousy, masked as contempt, that England long ago developed for her great rival, Holland.

Critical Letters on Smith's History were written in his life-time by Cadwallader Colden, and Remarks on the same book by Judge Samuel Jones, but they were hardly known until published by the Historical Society. Jones's account of New York during the Revolution is better remembered, and so is Horsmanden's story of the Negro Plot of 1741, printed in 1810. But a second attempt at a full history of city and State was not made until 1824. Yates and Moulton then published one. James Macauley followed with three large volumes of a similar sort in 1829, and ten years later Dunlap with two volumes. But none of these has much merit—Dunlap's far less than his histories of the development of the theatre and of the fine arts in America. Up to his time no one had studied the old municipal or provincial records. Thus there was no basis for veracious accounts of New Amsterdam, and every chapter in the later story of New York suffered from this cause as well as from insufficient inquiry into its own foundations. But a change for the better was at hand.

Spurred by urgent petitions from the Historical Society, the Legislature began to take an interest in the mass of valuable papers which, after the Revolution, had been transferred from New York to Albany. In 1819 it ordered the translation of many of those in the Dutch language. The work was done (not very well) by Dr. Van der Kemp, a Hollander; and his product was bound in twenty-six volumes of manuscript. Then, in 1841, the Legislature authorized the investigation and transcription of all papers relating to the history of the State that could be found in England, France, and Holland, and appointed as its agent for this purpose Mr. John Romeyn Brodhead, who had been for some time attached to the American legation at The Hague. For more than three years Brodhead worked diligently at his difficult task, cordially welcomed and assisted by the French and the Dutch authorities, but coldly received and hampered by dense tangles of red tape in London. When, after his return, he arranged his transcripts, they filled eighty large manuscript volumes of very

great historical value as illuminating the history of the other colonies and of Canada, and for the first time revealing the sub-strata of our own.

But again a singular mischance must be noted. In the State archives at The Hague Brodhead found some valuable documents, but he was told that the bulk of those relating to New Netherland were owned by its former proprietors, the West India Company. Applying at the offices of this company in Amsterdam, he learned that all its papers earlier in date than the year 1700 had been sold as waste paper at public auction in 1821; and the widest advertising failed to bring to light any that referred to New York. Thus Brodhead gleaned only twenty years too late, but with a serious diminution in the number of his sheaves; and, as in the case of the records which Stuyvesant would not permit Van der Donck to see, the things that fate chanced to suppress were again the ones that we should hold most precious now. It is indeed with covetous thoughts that we read, in a document once sent by the Dutch to the English Government, that "very perfect registers, relations, and journals" of the West India Company were then in existence. Now, excepting for certain land-patents, the records of the government of New Netherland begin only with the year 1638, and even after that time they are not complete, for all letters prior to 1646, as well as the Council Minutes for a term of four years, have disappeared. Therefore, while a true history of New Amsterdam can now be compiled, the full history of its first twenty-five years cannot be deciphered.*

The interest awakened by Brodhead's discoveries led to the arrangement and binding of two hundred volumes of domestic papers which had previously been in a disorderly condition; and in 1849 the Legislature commissioned Dr. O'Callaghan to print a series of the most valuable documents owned by the State. The result was four very large volumes, known as the *Documentary History of New York*, which contain, among many others, a few of the treasures that Brodhead had found. But it had already been proposed that these treasures should be translated and

* Little was written at any time about New Netherland in its mother country. Even the history of it published by Lambrechtsen in 1818 is superficial and incorrect, for, although he wrote before the dispersion of the old records of the West India Company at Amsterdam, he explains that he could not get access to them and could not even find a copy of the Remonstrance written by Van der Donck for the people of New Netherland in 1649—the most important document of its time. Nevertheless, his book was of service as inspiring a few New Yorkers to take an interest in the past of their town.

printed in full. The matter was referred to a select committee of the Senate which, in 1845, reported favorably upon it. And one paragraph of the report is worth quoting, for very seldom indeed can a citizen of any American State have been so severely arraigned before the representatives of its people on a non-political charge:

"It is the misfortune of this State that its early founders have been held up to the ridicule of the world by one of its most gifted sons, who has exhausted the resources of his wit and satire in exposing imaginary traits in their characters, while the most polished efforts of his graver style have been reserved to adorn the Corinthian columns of the more aristocratical institutions of foreign countries."

Then the report quotes part of those words of James Graham which I have already cited; and, it continues:

"To remove the reproach thus thoughtlessly attached to the annals of our State, it is only necessary to bring to light the true character of its early colonists, whose fatherland ranked at that period among the foremost nations of Europe in point of commercial wealth and enterprise, and before all others in the freedom of its government. * * * The traits ascribed by the mock historian to the first settlers of New York can scarcely be supposed to have characterized such a people; on the other hand, the manly virtues they displayed amid the toils and hardships of colonial life * * * deserve a very different commemoration at the hands of their descendants and successors."

The publication of Brodhead's finds was begun in 1853. He supplied a general introduction; but the work of translating and editing, and of compiling an index which fills one very large quarto volume, was entrusted to Dr. O'Callaghan. In all he sent forth eleven such volumes, and they are generally cited as the Colonial Documents, although their real title is Documents Relating to the Colonial History of the State of New York. Their value to the students of any of our northern colonies cannot be over-estimated, yet their adequate, intelligent presentation forms only a small part of the debt we owe to O'Callaghan. No other name stands nearly as high on the roll of those that have served our State with the historian's pen as the name of this Catholic Irishman who chanced to settle in Albany in 1837, and for many years was the keeper of the State archives. Indeed, no other name, I think, stands as high as his on the list of those who have done pioneer work among the long-neglected sources of American history. His interest in the anti-rent troubles that continued so long throughout the districts comprised in the great colonial

estate of the Van Rensselaers first led him to look into the local records. Amazed by their multitude and their importance, he learned the Dutch tongue and devoted his life to the work thus opened before him, pushing his investigations far beyond the borders of New York. He was the first to call attention, for example, to the extraordinary value of those Jesuit Relations which Parkman afterward turned to such good account. His influence was very helpful in deciding the authorities to send Brodhead to Europe; and when he saw the results of this enterprise, his own ardor deepened. It would be impossible here to name a tenth part of the major and minor publications bearing upon the history of our State which we owe to his indefatigable efforts. But the most conspicuous of them is a History of New Netherland, or New York under the Dutch, the first volume of which appeared in 1846, and the second in 1850. Certain sources of information now available were unknown in O'Callaghan's day. Therefore a few serious errors crept into his book through his undue reliance upon the statements of English writers, the most unfortunate being his acceptance of the apocryphal story of Argall's visit to Manhattan in the year 1613. Also, one or two singular slips may be noted, like the giving of the year 1624, instead of 1626, as that when Governor Minuit arrived and purchased Manhattan from the Indians. But except for these few blemishes, the History of New Netherland is a work of admirable accuracy, while it is as comprehensive and detailed as any student could wish; and our admiration for it grows when we remember that, at the time when it was written, not only the papers preserved at Albany but also those collected by Brodhead were still in manuscript.

This, the first account of the Dutch period in New York that was true, or that even approached to fullness, was quickly followed by another, written by Brodhead and published in 1853 as the first volume of a History of the State of New York which he intended to carry down to his own times. A second volume, ending with the year 1691—with the close of the Leisler epoch—was issued in 1871. But Brodhead died in 1873, and a third volume which he left in manuscript has not yet been printed. Nor has any one else yet written a full and accurate history of New York in the eighteenth century.

But with two good and full histories of New Amsterdam in

print for half a century, why are the mendacities of Knickerbocker still so potent? We still may say, almost as truly as George William Curtis in 1859, that "we all see the Dutch as Irving painted them," and that "when we speak of our doughty Governor Stuyvesant * * * we mean, not the governor of the histories, but of Diedrich Knickerbocker." Why has the influence of a burlesque not sensibly weakened, although, now that the taste in humor has changed, it works chiefly in traditional, indirect ways?

Partly because an indirect, traditional influence is the very hardest to shake off; but partly because neither O'Callaghan nor Brodhead had the qualities that tend to popularize historical information.

O'Callaghan's voluminous work is packed on every page with interesting facts; yet it is one of the most uninteresting and most exasperating of valuable books. In manner it is heavy, dry, and dull; and in arrangement it is so rigidly chronological that the complex tale it tells is very hard to follow. Each thread in the twisted skein of events with which it deals is constantly being dropped in favor of another, and therefore no phase of the story is so painted that it stirs the imagination or the sympathies, or even makes a clear impression on the memory. In short, O'Callaghan's book is a book of annals, a minutely faithful chronicle, not a vitalized history conceived with the true story-teller's feeling for the picturesque or the true historian's sense for proportion and for light and shade. It excited great interest among scholars, but it could not catch or hold the public's eye. No one, I think, could read it through for pleasure; and in spite of its exceptional worth to the student, even he must find it a sore test of his patience, his selective and co-ordinating faculties, and his memory as well.

To say this is not to detract from O'Callaghan's claims upon our gratitude, for the main need in a book that told an important historical tale for the first time was that it should be a full reservoir of authentic facts. The real misfortune was that a writer did not at once arise to put O'Callaghan's facts into better literary shape. Brodhead was not the man. His style has more ease than his predecessor's, his manner more warmth and color, his method rather more perspective, and his story much more clearness. Yet his book is also for the student, not for the general reader. "His chief merit," says one of his critics, "is his

admirable co-ordination of an immense mass of material covering a vast circuit of investigation," which is not quite the same as the presentation of facts and their meanings in a way to impress the popular mind. "His own mind," the same critic says, "was legal rather than judicial," and this fact not only injured the value of his book from the philosophical point of view, but impaired its trustworthiness in regard to special facts. Sometimes he is led far astray from the true historical mood by his sympathy with one party in the action; and this is notably true of the pages which we should be most glad to find impartially, judicially written; his account of Leisler's times is narrowly unfair.

Nevertheless, Brodhead's book is still the best we have about seventeenth-century New York; and nothing approaching in scholarly completeness to this or to O'Callaghan's New Netherland has since been written about our city or State. In the shape of special histories of the city we have had Valentine's (1853); Booth's (1859); Lossing's (1884); Lamb's (1877-1880); Todd's (1890); Roosevelt's (1891), and the four large volumes called the *Memorial History of the City of New York*. These are practically all; and among recent histories of the State the only ones that call for mention are Roberts's (1887) and Brooks's (1888). The unfamiliarity of some of these names is proof enough that the books to which they are attached were not successful in the sense of working a revolution in the popular attitude toward colonial New York; nor were the others more efficacious. In truth, there is not one book on the list that shows real literary skill and charm, and not one that is accurate, if, perhaps, we except Roberts's (in the series called *American Commonwealths*); and this, of course, gives comparatively little space to the life of the city on Manhattan. It is the best book, however, to put into the hands of one who wants a brief account of the life of the State; while Miss Booth's, I think, is for popular use the best that deals specifically with the city because, although it is superficial and often incorrect, it is at least agreeable to read. Mr. Theodore Roosevelt evidently did not take the time to examine any original sources, or even to secure a right perspective while following current versions of the history of his town; for example, after falling into a multitude of errors with regard to Jacob Leisler's deeds, he fails to mention the fact that the parliament of England reversed the verdict pronounced against him in the

provincial court. On the other hand, Mrs. Lamb's great industry led her so far into side paths of biography, tradition, and gossip that her book is too bulky for general reading while not scientific enough for trusting reference. And the Memorial History edited by James Grant Wilson and written by different hands, after the pattern set by Justin Winsor in the Memorial History of Boston, fell far below its model. It was not conceived with the same breadth and thoroughness; it was not edited at all in Winsor's sense of the term, and some of its authors were unwisely chosen. With a few admirable chapters it contains a number of poor ones, and as a whole it lacks both cohesion and authority.

There is still no history of our city which is either as scholarly in grasp, as accurate in detail, or as interesting in manner as it should be. Yet during the past fifty years so great an amount of good material has been accumulated that it might well have attracted a skilful hand. In fact, one such hand was attracted, but again mischance came into play. When Douglas Campbell published in 1892 his *Puritan in Holland, England, and New England*, he intended it as an introduction to a history of the City of New York. But again death defrauded us. The popularity of his *Puritan*, which ran through four editions within a year, and the influence it has had upon students (conspicuously shown, for example, in recent rewritings of the story of New England), assure us that a history of our city from the same pen would have made a mark that would have gone far to obliterate the one so deeply cut by Irving. Even as it is, more in this direction has been done by Campbell than by all the historians of New York put together. Perhaps he would have told the city's story in rather too "filio-pietistic" a way. But in this case this particular sin would not have been very sinful. It is certain that any exaggeration of the merits of the New-Netherlanders or of the strength of their influence upon the future of the Republic would have been discounted by ingrained prepossessions. In fact, the over-accentuations to be found in the *Puritan* have been thus discounted, even to excess.

It must be said, however, that while the book we need should possess the literary charm and force which so greatly helped the influence of Campbell's *Puritan*, it cannot be undertaken as a merely literary task. As there is no full reservoir of authentic

facts for the whole story of the eighteenth century, and as even O'Callaghan and Brodhead sometimes seem mistaken in the broader light of to-day, every step in a popular version would have to be based upon a personal study of the masses of original documents that city and State have printed, of many others published by other agencies, of the histories of neighboring colonies, and of the fragmentary products of a long list of writers who have touched in some way upon the story of the City of New York. Watson, Benson, J. Carson Brevoort, Gulian C. Verplanck, H. C. Murphy, Horatio Seymour, J. F. Jameson, Dexter North, James W. and Frederick de Peyster, John Gilmary Shea, John Austin Stevens, Henry Tuckerman, George Schuyler, Dr. Da Costa, O. H. Marshall, Robert Ludlow Fowler, William Elliot Griffis, Edward Eggleston, Berthold Fernow—these and many more have published chapters of our colonial history, or comments upon certain phases of it, which no future historian can neglect.

I have thus far avoided all reference to the most recently written book that tells the story of colonial New York. No histories of America have been as popular as Mr. John Fiske's; and when he announced that his *Beginnings of New England* and his *Old Virginia and Her Neighbors* would be followed by two similar volumes called *The Dutch and Quaker Colonies*, much was expected in the way of profit and pleasure. These volumes have now appeared, but a book that is so sure to pass into the hands of many thousands of readers cannot be dismissed in a paragraph. I hope to speak about it in detail in a forthcoming number of this *REVIEW*.

M. G. VAN RENSSELAER.